Representative Modern Plays

THREE WONDER PLAYS. By Lady Gregory. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
DEAR BRUTUS. By J. M. Barrie. Charles Scribner's Sons.
HASSAN. By James Elroy Flecker. Alfred A. Knopf.
LOYALTIES. By John Galsworthy. Charles Scribner's Sons.
FROM MORN TO MIDNIGHT. By Georg Kaiser. Translated from the German by Ashley Dukes. Brentano's.
GUILTY SOULS. By Robert Nichols. Harcourt, Brace & Co.
GOAT ALLEY. By Ernest Howard Culbertson. Stewart Kidd Company.
THE SUN CHASER. By Jeanette Marks. Stewart Kidd Company.
EAST OF SUEZ. By W. Somerset Maugham. George H. Doran Company.
KRINDLESYKE. By Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. The Macmillan Company.
THE VERGE. By Susan Glaspell. Small, Maynard & Co.
FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE. By Edith Gittings Reid. The Macmillan Company.
BODY AND SOUL. By Arnold Bennett. George H. Doran Company.

WHEN one takes up a group of plays distinguished by names as eminent as those of Barrie, Galsworthy, Bennett and Lady Gregory, not to mention Somerset Maugham, Wilfrid Gibson, and other writers of note, one will naturally expect to find the highest expression of the dramatic art—at least, its highest expression as to be observed among our contemporaries. But one who plunges into the present group of books with such sanguine expectations will probably be disappointed. Much good wokk there certainly is, many plays of power and originality; but the best writing does not always come from that quarter whence one expects it; some of the most prominent dramatists have been guilty of mediocre productions, and some of the authors not generally known have given us plays comparing favorably with those of the acknowledged masters.

Plays of every hue and variety are to be found in the group under review, from the deliciously whimsical to the violently melodramatic. At the extreme of the fantastic are Lady Gregory's "Three Wonder Plays," romantic comedies that bear us out of reality into an entrancing realm where queens and princes and even supernatural creatures hold sway. The play entitled "The Dragon" is typical of the book; here we find a king vowing to marry his daughter to the first man that enters the palace gates; we see her lover, another king, disguised as a cook, while waiting faithfully in the kitchen to rescue her from imminent perils, and eventually we observe the hero subduing the dragon that comes to devour the princess, and thereby, of course, winning the lady of his heart. The plays are written with a humor that is delightful, and with an elfin imagination that is irresistible and delightful.

"Dear Brutus," by J. M. Barrie, is another play that bears us off into a fairyland. With his characteristic whimsical humor, the author describes an enchanted forest that will permit those that enter it to cast off the garments of the lives they have lived and to be as they might have been had they a second chance in life. It is the author's purpose to illustrate the lines of Shakespeare that:

> The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

This thesis Sir James succeeds in demonstrating to our entire satisfaction; at least he shows that our characters are the chief forces determining our careers; but, in spite of the originality of the author's method of dealing with his theme, in spite of the humorous and highly human quality of the dialogue, "Dear Brutus" is less satisfying, let us say, than "The Admirable Crichton," and less skillfully written than many of the author's works.

Even more fantastic than "Dear Brutus," and certainly much further from reality, is James Elroy Flecker's play entitled "Hassan." As one might divine from the exotic title, it is a story of old Bagdad; it has the setting of the "Arabian Nights," and deals with the Caliph Haroun Al-Raschid and his subjects. That famous monarch is shown to be anything but merciful or just; he acts the part of the typical villain of melodrama by giving the beautiful slave girl the choice of marriage with him or of one day with her lover followed by a death of slow torture; and the tense and powerful climax of the play revolves about the decision made by the heroine. In spite of its melodramatic leanings, the play is characterized by a vigorous imagination and by a rare spirit of beauty.

Turning from the romantic to the realistic plays, we may mention first of all Galsworthy's "Loyalties," a drama that has been receiving considerable attention from theatrical audiences of late. It is with something of disappointment that one follows the dialogue of the play; it has the stamp of mediocrity; it has neither the broad social appeal of "Justice," the significant irony of "The Mob," nor the dynamic clash of characters of "Strife." It begins like an ordinary detective drama; it continues by showing the effect of clannishness and of false loyalties, and it ends in a tragedy that is by no means inevitable. On the subject of loyalties Mr. Galsworthy has nothing to say that has not been said more effectively by Royce and others; and, from the point of view of dramatic effectiveness he has given us nothing to compare with his earlier work.

"From Morn to Midnight," by George Kaiser, resembles "Loyalties" in that it deals with the experiences of a thief, or, rather, of an embezzler; it is designed to do what no one, perhaps, has ever done more skillfully than Dostoievsky—to show the effects of the workings of conscience in a criminal; and it aims to demonstrate the proposition that "You can buy nothing worth having, even with all the money of all the banks in the world." Though the play is impressionistic in its method, the dialogue has a philosophic tendency, and the author has a monosyllabic staccato style that tends to be annoying.

Another attempt to deal with the gnawings of conscience in an embezzler is to be found in "Guilty Souls," by Robert Nichols—but though the play begins interestingly, it is dragged out interminably, very pretentiously, and not very convincingly. One much prefers, for example, "Goat Alley," by Ernest Howard Culbertson, a tragedy of negro life, which, though it deals with criminals, yet is thoroughly human and makes no pompous effort at moralizing. The play, which represents an enlargement of a one act drama of the same name, is written entertainingly and convincingly; the dialogue impresses one as real, and the characters have the breath of life.

Another impressive tragedy is "The Sun Chaser," by Jeanette Marks. Here, in midwinter in a small backwoods town, we see a deluded and drunken man ardently chasing the sun, loking afar for the happiness he does not see at home, and unwittingly casting the shadow of disaster over the wife and small daughter he loves and yet neglects. Tragedy is also writen in large letters across the pages of "East of Suez," the latest work of W. Somerset Maugham. As the title implies, the drama is an Oriental one; the scene is Pekin, the chief male characters are Englishmen, and the heroine is a beautiful halfbreed who makes possible the conventional triangle plot by falling ardently in love with her husband's best friend. The story takes the somewhat hectic course that such stories have a habit of taking; and, while always colorful and interesting, it is never quite free from melodrama from the end of the second scene until the lurid culmination of the seventh.

"Krindlesyke," by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, is another play whose background is a grim and sordid one; although written in blank verse, it is the intensely realistic tale of an old shepherd, his sons and their wives; it is a rather disagreeable story of groping and narrow lives, but is presented with a vividness that makes it impressive. Much less successful is "The Verge," by Susan Glaspell, the story of a woman reaching out for that which life does not give her—a woman who expresses her yearnings for higher things by insulting and casting off her perfectly innocent daughter and murdering her no less innocent lover. The jacket proclaims that the play is "fourth dimensional"—perhaps it is, for it surpasses ordinary understanding.

To turn to "Florence Nightingale," by Edith Gittings Reid, is to be confronted with a much more pleasant piece of work. This drama represents an attempt to illuminate some of the outstanding incidents in the life of the famous war nurse; it offers us intimate pictures of Florence Nightingale, and it embodies a love element which, while not historically authentic, is none the less interesting.

Last on the list, though by no means least important, is "Body and Soul," by Arnold Bennett, a play written with a lighter touch than most of the realistic works we have considered thus far. Mr. Bennett's forte is perhaps not the drama, but he has achieved an amusing piece of work in this farce of the bored and aristocratic Lady Mab who allows herself to be impersonated by a young typewriter agent, with consequences that are disastrous to her pocket book and love affairs, though beneficial to her reputation. Underlying the play is a vein of mild satire that helps to lend interest to a piece of work that is above all entertaining.

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Continental Stagecraft

A Review by LAWRENCE REAMER.

CONTINENTAL STAGECRAFT. By Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

TWO eminent authorities on the art of the theater have united in producing "Continental Stagecraft." Kenneth Macgowan has been an earnest student of stage decorations ever since the newest movements in that direction became significant enough to deserve a record, and Robert Edmond Jones has been possibly the most active figure in the creation here of a similar interest in what the artist may do on the stage. Certainly of all that the new stage art has shown to New York he may just say "quorum pars magna fui."

Progress in scenic art, interesting as it may be in its complete revelation, is not always an engrossing subject to the amateur. Experiments with colored silks over electric bulbs, concealed lighting apparatus and different devices of the electricians and stage directors may accomplish important and beautiful results, but accounts of them make hard reading to the layman. In Mr. Macgowan's descriptions technicalities are rare and Mr. Jones's pictures as well as those collected by the two collaborators are beautiful and more illuminating than any words could ever be.

"Continental Stagecraft" proves how rapidly the newer art is advancing. Just as the designs of Leon Bakst, now on exhibition here, seemed mild enough after the works of some of his successors, have Reinhardt, Appia and the somewhat mythical Gordon Craig receded into the background. During the two weeks they spent abroad the two collaborators saw some sixty theatrical representations. Yet there is only one name of the older guard to be observed in the list of scenes they found worth depicting in their book. Ernest Roller's setting for the first act of "Die Meistersinger" is reproduced as an example of Viennese stage art. Rollo is no newcomer, yet there are no more beautiful designs in the list in spite of what must seem almost the conservatism of age in his art.

Reinhardt has disappeared to make way for such new directors as Leopold Jessner, Pirchan, Fehling, Sievert, Strohbach and Andre among the Germans; Stanislavsky and Pitoeff among the Russians, and in Paris our old friends of the Theatre du Vieux Colombier, Copeau and Jouvet, with whose methods New York is already more or less familiar. None of the modern stage decoration seems so essentially a part of the drama it illustrates as the German. Descendants from Reinhardt in the matter of art, they maintain some of his cardinal principles in their flower. Reinhardt never felt the call of beauty. It was the last quality that entered into his scenic plans. His successors feel no more this aesthetic appeal.

They seek the violent contrasts of light and shadow, the crude power that lies in bold outline and the effective distribution of mass effects. The modern German drama is neurasthenic, abnormally oversexed in sentiment and in a high degree representative of the prevailing state of mind in Germany. Take for instance such a composition as "Parricide," by Arnold Bronnen, which is said to have been viewed with appreciation by every section of the Berlin theatergoing public with the exception of the police. German stage decoration has represented with artistic exactness the character of the Berlin drama of the day. New York saw in "From Morn Until Night" a specimen of the so-called expressionistic drama which is sweeping over the stage of that country. George Kaiser is probably the most talented of these contemporaneous authors. But his play awakened no enthusiasm here.

So the work of the German scenic artists, morbid as it is in most cases, possesses no lessons for our own theater. Common to the stage of every European country today is the passing of any degree of realism, which has become so intolerable to the new directors that the painted scene is rarely met with in the most advanced playhouses. How reactionary, however, we may be here is shown in the beautifully designed "Follies," in which Mr. Ziegfeld is displaying two painted backdrops, which date from the day that looked upon the scene as an easel picture, enjoyed the painted banners flying in the wind and the waterfalls as they poured over the cliffs.

The painted scene exists no more in the most modern of the European theaters. The Redoutensaal in Vienna with its permanent structure, its lack of lights and curtain, puts the actor almost on a level wth the spectator, while our old friend Jacques Copeau has his stage in the Theater of the Old Dovecot still built in a way to bring spectators and actors into the closest touch. Of these modern advances in stagecraft on the continent Mr. Macgowan writes with his broad knowledge and agreeable style, while Mr. Jones's pencil has drawn impressively the latest wonders of the European world of playwrights' dreams. "Continental Stagecraft" is not a treatise on the tiresome technical description of decorative processes, but a delight to all lovers of beauty, whether it be on the stage or between the covers of a book.

GEORG BRANDES IN LIFE AND LETTERS. By Julius Moritzen. D. S. Colyer, Newark, N. J.
KNUT HAMSUN. By Hanna Astrup Larsen. Alfred A. Knopf.

AMERICAN acquaintance with modern Scandinavian literature has become considerable, but is still rather scrappy, as the selections for translation have been capricious. Mr. Moritzen performs a useful service in his monograph in pointing out the very important place of Brandes, not merely in relation to the literature of his own land but as an international critic and expositor. His position is unique among writers and thinkers of the last sixty years or so, as an interpreter of the nations to each other. Mr. Moritzen's book is especially well inspired in the space given to the important works by Brandes that are not yet available in English; in particular, his study of Michael Angelo. The book is informative and explanatory rather than critical. It ought to whet the appetite of American students and send them to Brandes's own writings.

Hamsun has gained a great deal of publicity, and has reached a wide audience here, for some of his books, but comparatively little has appeared about the man himself. This brief biographical and analytical sketch is doubly welcome, as presenting fresh material and because it is very well done. It is more important as illuminating biography than as criticism, but is also of value as an interpretation of an alien type.